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Interview | George Gittoes: Artist, Peacemaker

In the early 1970s in Sydney, George Gittoes and Martin Sharp ran The Yellow House, combining visual arts with film and theatre to introduce a new kind of art to Australia. Today, after thirty years of making art in war zones around the world, Gittoes lives with performance artist Hellen Rose at a second Yellow House he has established in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Underneath the ominous sound of US drones and helicopters, and on the frontier of an ongoing war between the US and the Taliban, he runs a creative hub for actors and filmmakers. He also runs a circus, touring the provinces of Afghanistan with a monkey on his shoulder, and entertaining children who have never seen film or performance before. While he draws and paints, Gittoes is also making films: *Snow Monkey* (2015), *Love City, Jalalabad* (2013) and *The Miscreants of Taliwood* (2009). These follow his earlier filmmaking ventures in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. Rose works with film too, running filmmaking workshops for women. To secure local support to carry on his work there, Gittoes has been in negotiation with the Afghani Taliban, and suspects he is being watched by Islamic State (I.S.). A portrait painting that Gittoes is exhibiting in Perth, *Moulana Gul Badshah* (2009), represents how amidst the violence of the region, The Yellow House stands for peace. The mullah had been planning to kidnap Gittoes and Rose before they invited him to the Yellow House to persuade him that they were doing good things in Jalalabad. The following interview with Gittoes was conducted in Perth, where he is exhibiting alongside other artists in '9/11', a show curated by Chelsea Hopper about 9/11 and its aftermath at MOANA Project Space. He is also the subject of a retrospective that is currently touring Australia, called 'I Witness'. In 2015 he was the first artist to receive the Sydney Peace Prize.



Figure 1. Artists at the Yellow House in Jalalabad

What do The Yellow House in Sydney and the Yellow House in Afghanistan have in common?

What I've learned is, through films in Nicaragua and Rwanda, where the photos were intense, I mean I was there when the heads were coming off, I always had the hope that this would mean that things would get better. Thinking about it, what helps me not getting post-traumatic stress is helping people. So I've come to conclusion that the work that I do, like the films I've just made, can inspire young artists, but I need to do work on the ground and see physical change in these war zones. So I see the Yellow House in Afghanistan as my most important work. The paintings and films are trivial compared to the actual place itself. I don't understand Beuys much but his idea of social sculpture does appeal to me, because the same inspirations that I have are like this.

The Yellow House is an optimistic work, but many of your films and drawings are very dark in their subject.

There are a thousand people doing decorative art so I make no apologies about doing dark art. If everyone was doing dark art then I would probably be doing Matisse. I just bought a house after many years, and people have for years been saying, "I couldn't live with your art, couldn't buy one," and I agree with them. There's no way I am going to hang my own work on my walls!

When did the drawings start? Where does the Gittoes style come from?

The darkness was always there. The Hotel Kennedy suite was at the Yellow House, and people said these etchings were evil because they were retrograde. They looked back to Albert Tucker, and it gave them the creeps! And even at my new house, some surfies looked over the fence at my new house and thought we were Satanists! I was honest with them and now they ignore me. But the art has that effect on people. My way of drawing belongs to a long dark tradition. The first artist I could relate to was Audrey Beardsley. The drawings with a foetus having cunnilingus with a woman, there are some very dark ones in there. In Australia when I was young there was no graphic work.

How did you know Bernard Smith?

Bernard brought out Clement Greenberg, and I had just discovered Mondrian and Malevich and Eve Klein, you know the image of someone jumping out the window. He was struggling to find someone that would fit Greenberg's taste, so Bernard took him to see my studio. Greenberg said you've got to come to New York! So I took a job with the Cahill Freeway. I arrived in New York with ten dollars, and one of my biggest experiences was going around to a Salvation Army place and there were all these failed minimalist paintings with cooking grease on them! I also went looking for a job and all these corporate offices had minimal paintings in them.

So you were doing abstract art at this time?

I was doing some interesting things. I painted a garden blue, yellow and white and took a photo of it. At this stage Greenberg liked Gottleib and it looked a bit like my work. It was just a phase I was going through.



Figure 2: George Gittoes, Page of Visual Diary, 13 January 2010.

What gives your drawings such impact? I find them very strong.

There's a thing with drawing. One of my friends is Mayan Beckmann, Max Beckmann's granddaughter. When she sees a drawing she knows why it's good. There's only one in a hundred that's good. We went to a show of Ludwig Meidner and we both zeroed in on a picture of someone throwing a punch, where the artist made the fist get smaller. It's like it's going to hurt. Mayan and I knew that for someone to do a drawing as good as that the artist needs to be in a heightened state. I don't know what's happened to art but there was a time that people appreciated good drawing. Lots of art today is tracing. It looks like a copy of a photograph.

Could the Yellow House be established elsewhere? You have spoken before about setting one up in Syria and Mali.

Yes. Just watching the way people react to it. Young people are sick of being ineffective and they can see we are being super-effective. It's terribly important to keep it going and its activities are increasing exponentially. You know it costs a million dollars for every Australian soldier we have per year in Afghanistan. I run the Yellow House on about a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year.

How has the Yellow House changed Jalalabad?

Enormously. The Yellow House has gone way beyond my expectations and Jalalabad has progressed. When we first went to Jalalabad they were bombing video stores. Now you can buy them from ice cream boys.

In *Love City Jalalabad* you show, with some warning, the kind of films that Taliban have been supporting, brutal execution videos, and these are very different films to those that you are making and distributing.

Love City is like an okay film. More importantly, now all the billboards have something on them. You have a picture of twelve-year-old girl saying 'you don't have to get married, don't have to obey your parents'. The huge coup for us was that music was considered evil, and we did a music video and put it on in the main street of Jalalabad. The first electronic billboard was only being used to introduce mosque time and we negotiated to rent it, and the Taliban went down and were spitting in our faces. I waited until they'd vented, and said this is about your kids, this is about the future of Afghanistan, about kids going to school and this kind of thing. The singer is Afghan, they all know who he is. They thought about it and said yes. Now we have movies showing all night long in between mosque ads. That's my greatest work of art so far. Better than having work in a gallery.

What drives you to do this kind of work?

When I make art, I also want people to know the story. When I painted the preacher in Rwanda [*The Preacher*, (1995)], I wanted people to know how brave the preacher was in reading the Bible, and giving dignity before he died. I want people to know this was about a man I greatly admired. When I came back to Australia I did not want him to be forgotten.

When I was young I used to read books about Goya and Van Gogh, but I don't read any art books any more. I recently read the biography on Elon Musk and that was most inspiring. Elon Musk is like Van Gogh, he's like a saint, and if you look at his career he didn't care about money. He's always been teetering on the edge. He's got solar power stations across America, he's got a Tesla car and announced power packs and so on. To me he's an inspired artist, a more inspired artist than anyone in the world today.

The other night I was on a panel with Louis Psihoyos who did *The Cove* (2009) and he's just done *Racing Extinction* (2014). I've always wanted to meet him because as a filmmaker activist he's light years ahead of me. The dolphin cull has gone down to a quarter of what it was because of him and he's recently projected close-to-extinction animals on the Empire State Building. He wouldn't know that it's like Christo wrapping Little Bay, but it is. In his most recent movie, there's a bird in this movie,

it's making this beautiful song but it's the last bird of its species so it will never find a mate. It breaks your heart to realise that once it dies there will nothing to add that beautiful song to the world again. Also *The Act of Killing* (2012), by Joshua Oppenheimer, is a masterpiece, an absolute masterpiece. He'd seen *Miscreants of Taliwood* (2012) and thought he wanted to do something similar. He went to my producers in Norway and made a better film than I'd ever made. Now I've tried to make a film better than his, with *Snow Monkey*. I guess it's a bit like Picasso and Braque keying off each other. So I'm still painting and drawing, but it's these films that are inspiring me.

My collaborators are Piraya in Norway who've invested in *Snow Monkey*. They're the most exciting documentary makers in the world. The only curator in the world who really gets my work is the boss of Piraya, Torstein Grude, and he's got every real documentary maker on his books. He's got Josh, also Andrei Nekrasov who did *Russian Lessons* (2010). He's got Nishtha Jain who did *Gulabi Gang* (2012) and Petr Lom who did the film about the Jasmine Revolution [*Back to the Square* (2012)]. These are my contemporaries. When I go to Norway I am surrounded by these people. We get together and as a group we feel like we are changing the world.



Figure 3: Snow Monkey Cast

Have these documentaries come about because the technology for making film has gotten more affordable and easier to access?

Not at all! Are you nuts! That idea is twenty years old. Now it costs me almost a million dollars to make a film. It has become less accessible because people are frightened of it. People like SBS and the ABC have these quality standards where you've got to have a feature film sound mix, a feature film grade. All this stuff costs a

fortune. There's no cameras now that are cheap any more. There was a short period where people could go out to make TV movies, but that's over.

Was that when you made *Soundtrack to War*?

That was made with semi-professional high end, but it was made for only \$20,000, without any money because you could do that then. I had a budget for *Snow Monkey* for \$200,000 from Screen Australia but I knew it would take half a million, which it has, so I had to raise the rest. Then SBS will pay me \$5000 for it. So not only will SBS make it hard to buy, as you've got to spend a fortune to make it to get it past their standards, but now they've dropped their price to screen films.

But the best art in the world today is being done by, and here I'm not talking about decorative art but my kind of art, being done by Joel [Oppenheimer] and Louis [Psihoyos]. When I was young I would have done anything to meet say Wilhelm de Kooning, but these days I was just thrilled to meet Louis. To me *Raising Extinction* is great art. There's only a handful of people that can change the world. What Elon Musk has done is incredible. In Australia there's one dealership where you can buy those cars, but you can't charge them anywhere.

To think of Musk as an artist, we would have to change our definition of an artist. Rasheed Araeen the founder of *Third Text* wrote to me once and asked what I thought about flooding the Australian desert, creating an inland sea. He seemed to think that art was no longer to be found in galleries.

The Israeli's are doing that kind of thing. With the money spent on defence, you could do anything. You could probably do it with the money they spent on those new frigates. What I'm working towards is cutting down on fear, so my other favourite person in the world is Julian Assange. He's a genius, the greatest Australian artist we've ever produced. He's the Ned Kelly of today. My feeling is that I should try to save the Barrier Reef, but it's not my area, and I'm better off doing what I do, which is working in war zones, talking to the Taliban, being surrounded by people I'm supposed to be scared of. It's almost as revolutionary as electric cars. It gets around the fear factor that the bad guys are using to take away our freedoms. The biggest fear I've got, and what I'm seeing in Afghanistan, is the increase in robotics. Every 15 minutes I have an unmanned Predator flying over the Yellow House, and the trucks in Jalalabad are being turned into robots, and all the smartest engineers I know are working to create military robots.



Figure 5 Gittoes at Zuccotti Park

If anything happens to me it will be the Taliban from Pakistan inspired by the I.S. or the I.S. in conjunction with the CIA. I've had a lot of death threats. They are hand delivered to Islamabad and more recently to the Australian Embassy in Kabul and I just have to ignore them. The local Taliban however love me. They don't do suicide bombs or terrorism. I have to talk to them about changing their name, because they're not the same as the Pakistani Taliban. They should be called the Afghan Freedom Fighters or something like that.

This year's Venice Biennale was about war and conflict, but your work was nowhere to be seen. Should George Gittoes represent Venice at the next Biennale?

I can't even get hung in the Archibald. I put a portrait of Julian Assange in there and couldn't get hung, not even in the Salon de Refuses. I think Australians would have liked to have seen that.